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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Prying Off the Lid

Secret Activity Points to Dilemma

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"Kennedy's covering up again. He's not telling the whole truth."

That was a reaction to the President's reply to a Bay of Pigs question thrown at him at his last news conference.

Of course he was covering up, but as Representative George Mahon of Texas said in the House on Thursday, the administration has been goaded into making disclosures about past and present intelligence activities in and around Cuba that are hurting the nation.

The questioner asked if the President could say whether the four Americans who died in the Bay of Pigs were employees of the government or the Central Intelligence Agency—as if the government had nothing to do with the CIA.

Mr. Kennedy replied slowly, carefully choosing his words, obviously not wanting to give a direct answer, yet wanting to avoid giving offense to the widows of the four men whose deaths have become known only recently through attempts to pry off the lid.

Mr. Kennedy went around the hush. He said a good many Americans had served their country in the last 15 years. Some had lost their lives but the government has not felt it was in the country's interest to go into detail. Yes, the four men were serving their country, but they were on a volunteer fight and because of the nature of their work it was not a matter of public record, as it might be if the men were soldiers or sailors.

In Twilight Zone

That put the men in the patriot class, which should please their widows, but still left them in a twilight zone. Recent prying about in that zone has brought out bits and parts that move the U. S. government closer to the heart of the Bay of Pigs affair than it has wanted to appear. To what end are the demands made that the whole story be laid on the table? The American people, it is said, must know the whole story.

The great intelligence gap, Representative Mahon told the House, is "in the intelligence of those who are daily revealing the secrets of the intelligence operations of the United States government. In recent weeks there has been a great excess of talk about the procedures of our intelligence apparatus. Critics have made public statements on matters which should never have been discussed in public."

Mr. Mahon's competence to speak out on this subject comes from 20 years of dealing with defense secrets: he is currently chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

The Texan refrained from charging anyone with playing politics, although he could have done so with justification. He hit a higher note by remarking that the American people are interested in our intelligence activities as they are in all phases of the workings of their government. "But we are not playing games" and the price we pay for the luxury of disclosure of intelligence activities is the further erosion of the country's capacity to defend itself.

Not a Sport

To be sure we are not playing games, and the real issue in all of the fussing about whether this or that is known about what goes on in Cuba, or how this or that was done, is whether any government in an open society such as ours should undertake underhand operations. If successful, sleeping dogs are allowed to lie, as they were in the 1954 Guatemala operation, but if unsuccessful, the secrecy is a tantalizing invitation to the opposition to make political hay which winds up by damaging the country.

Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon says he cannot reconcile the Central Intelligence Agency with democratic government. He rightly says that millions of Americans can die if that agency goes amok. But the Senator makes no distinction between the intelligence gathering functions of the CIA, which surely are indispensable, and the secret execution of policy, which is questionable.

It is when the CIA attempts the latter function that its activities collide with the principles and practices of a democratic society.

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